Research Note: Decommodification and the Worlds of Welfare Revisited

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the theoretical, empirical and methodological limitations of Esping-Andersen's Three Worlds of Welfare decommodification index. It highlights a, to date, overlooked error in Esping-Andersen's original calculations that led to the incorrect positioning of three borderline countries (Japan; the UK and Ireland) and which resulted in the empirically erroneous composition of the Three Worlds of Welfare. Updated decommodification data from 1998/9 is used to explore the influential role of variable weighting in the creation of the Three Worlds typology. Finally, the paper revisits the decommodification index to examine how the relationships between the countries have changed since 1980. The paper concludes by questioning the extent to which the Three Worlds of Welfare still exist, and indeed, at least in empirical terms, the extent to which they ever did.

Key words: decommodification; regimes; methodology; Esping-Andersen.

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Introduction

This paper draws on data from a larger research project, the focus of which was the re-examination of Esping-Andersen's (1990) influential 'Three Worlds of Welfare' thesis (from now on TWW) and the extension of its principles into other policy areas – notably health care (Bambra, 2005a; 2005b) and gender (Bambra, 2004). This paper was originally intended to be a straightforward update of Esping-Andersen's labour market decommodification index, the main element of TWW. However, in revisiting the TWW and recreating Esping-Andersen's index, it was impossible to ignore the theoretical, empirical and methodological concerns that have been expressed by other commentators (such as Castles and Mitchell, 1993; Kangas, 1994; Ragin, 1994; Fawcett and Papadopoulos, 1997; Shalev, 1996; Pitruzello, 1999; Gough, 2001; Arts and Gilssen, 2002), and indeed to acknowledge a couple of further issues that emerged specifically from this project.

The purpose of this research note is therefore three-fold: Firstly, to discuss the theoretical, empirical and methodological limitations of Esping-Andersen's index and to use the updated decommodification data to explore a specific issue – the use of population coverage to weight each of the constituent decommodification indexes (pensions, unemployment, sickness); secondly, to discuss a, to date, overlooked error in Esping-Andersen's original calculations that led to the incorrect positioning of three borderline countries - Japan in the middle (Conservative) decommodification group; and the UK and Ireland in the (Liberal) low decommodification group; and thirdly to update and revisit the TWW decommodification index and examine how the relationships between the countries have changed. The paper concludes by questioning the extent to which the TWW still exist, and indeed, at least in empirical terms, the extent to which they ever did.

Decommodification and the Worlds of Welfare

In the TWW (1990: 2), Esping-Andersen presented a typology of welfare states based respectively upon the operationalisation of three principles: decommodification (which examined the extent to which an individual's welfare is reliant upon the market), levels of social stratification (which examined the role of welfare states in maintaining or breaking down social stratification); and the private-public mix (which focused on the relative roles of the state, the family and the market in welfare provision). He argued that theoretically (the idea of three welfare state types was determined a priori to the empirical analysis see Esping-Andersen, 1990: 51), and empirically, that the application of these principles resulted in the division of welfare states into three qualitatively different regime types: Liberal (UK, USA, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), Conservative (Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Japan, Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands), and Social Democratic (Nordic countries).

The decommodification aspect of the three worlds analysis created and combined three individual decommodification indexes (pensions, unemployment, and sickness). An identical scoring process was used for each of these constituent schemes (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 54), and so, for example, in the pensions index, decommodification was measured in terms of the additive qualities of (1) Minimum pension benefits for a standard production worker earning average wages (expressed as a percentage replacement rate of the ratio of the pre-taxation benefit to gross normal worker earnings in that year); (2) Standard pension benefits for a normal worker, (expressed as a percentage replacement rate of the ratio of the pre-taxation benefit to gross normal worker earnings in that year); (3) Contribution period required for a standard pension; and (4) Individual's share of pension financing. Each country received a score of 1 for low decommodification; 2 for medium; or 3 for high decommodification for each of these four indicators. The classification into three scores was done on the basis of one standard deviation around the mean. Finally, these scores were added and weighted by the percent of the (relevant) population covered by the program (for pensions, the take-up rate) with means-tested programs, such as in Australia, negatively scored (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 54). The scores of the replacement rate variables (variables 1 and 2) were doubled in

each of the constituent indexes (i.e. the range of available scores for these variables were 2, 4, or 6 rather than 1, 2 or 3). Finally, the three decommodification indexes were combined to give an overall decommodification score for each country.

TABLE 1 HERE PLEASE

These three indexes were a substantial influence on the final composition of the three worlds typology (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 26-29, 52). However, as Table 1 shows, the actual arrangement of countries into the three regimes when only the decommodification data is considered is slightly different from the finalised TWW typology (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 52). For example, Austria is in the high scoring, Social Democratic, decommodification group where as in Esping-Andersen's finalised typology it is in the medium scoring, Conservative regime. It should be noted that this is because the TWW typology is also based on consideration of two other aspects of welfare state provision: stratification and the public-private mix (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 55, 79). The focus throughout this paper though is on just the decommodification elements.

Theoretical, Empirical and Methodological Limitations

An extensive, and on-going, debate has surrounded Esping-Andersen's analysis of welfare state decommodification and the resulting TWW typology (for a detailed summary see Arts and Gelissen, 2002). This debate has largely focused on the theoretical aspects of the analysis as numerous critiques exist about the range of countries and regimes (see for example, Leibfreid, 1992; Castles & Mitchell, 1993; Ferrera, 1996; Bonoli, 1997;); the absence of gender in the typology (see for example, Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1994, 1999; Bambra, 2004), the analytical focus on cash benefits (Alber, 1995; Abrahamson, 1999; Kautto, 2002; Bambra, 2005a; 2005b) and the creation of regimes that generalize about all forms of social policy provision from this base (Kasza, 2002; Bambra, 2005a). However, the debate has also exposed the limitations of Esping-Andersen's methodology, particularly in respect to the decommodification indexes. This led to the utilization of more statistically robust methodologies (most notably cluster analysis), the results of which challenged the empirical

accuracy of the three-fold typology by identifying four or five different types of welfare state (see for example, Kangas, 1994; Ragin, 1994; Papadopoulos, 1998; Pitruzzello, 1999).

The methodology that Esping-Andersen used to construct the decommodification indexes has met with a degree of criticism. Attention has particularly been placed upon the additive nature of the indexes and the reliance upon averaging (Castles and Mitchell, 1993; Kangas, 1994; Ragin, 1994; Pitruzello, 1999). Indeed, both these aspects minimise and simplify the impact of the original variability within the raw data. Attention has also been drawn to the use of one standard deviation around the mean to classify the countries into regimes, as this has a noticeable impact on the classification of certain countries (Fawcett and Papadopoulos, 1997), most notably the UK which if a different cut off point were used may not have fallen within the Liberal regime. Indeed, the classification of the UK as a Liberal regime country, given its borderline score of 23.4 (which is exactly the cut off point between the Liberal and Conservative classifications) suggests that the a priori theoretical prediction of three regimes may have influenced the choice of cut off point – the country classifications would not have been the same if two or three standard deviations around the mean were used (see Table 1). Furthermore, how Esping-Andersen operationalised the mean and standard deviation method meant that it was impossible for any result other than a three-fold typology: regime classification is either above (high/Social Democratic), below (low/Liberal), or between (medium/Conservative) one standard deviation around the mean (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 54). In this way a four fold, or five fold, etc classification of welfare states is methodologically impossible. This suggests that the theoretical a priori choice of three regimes by Esping-Andersen unduly influenced the choice and development of the methodology used to empirically test their existence (Papadopoulos, 1998).

Variable Weighting

How this limited methodology was actually implemented by Esping-Andersen is also perhaps one of the most important and influential aspects of the TWW typology. The methodology used to construct the decommodification indexes involved the weighting of certain key variables (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 48-54). Firstly, the wage replacement rates received as

compensation under the pension, unemployment and sickness benefit schemes were each given a double value. In each of the indexes there were two variables relating to replacement rates so this resulted in the combined value of replacement rates ranging from 4 (if the low score of 1 was received for each of the two variables and doubled) to 12 (if the high score of 3 was received for each of the two variables and doubled). The other two indicators measured in this way, for example in the case of the pensions index the contribution period required for a standard pension and the individual's share of pension financing, only contributed between 1 and 3 points each to the final decommodification score. In this way the indexes overly represent the role of replacement rates (Fawcett and Papadopoulos, 1997).

This weighting of replacement rates is justified by Esping-Andersen on the basis of their considerable importance in terms of 'people's welfare-work choices' (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 54), decommodification, and enabling 'individuals and families to maintain a normal and socially acceptable standard of living regardless of their market performance' (Esping-Andersen, 1987: 86). However, the other incidence of weighting in the indexes is less justifiable under the banner of decommodification. The last factor in each of the constituent indexes is the percent of the relevant population covered by the programme. This is used to weight the combined scores of the other four variables. It is therefore an extremely influential variable and has a disproportionate impact on the total decommodification score of each country in each index: Countries with a high coverage rate but with low scores on the other variables (such as the replacement rate variables) are rewarded, where as countries with lower coverage but more generous replacements rates are punished. This may perhaps seem intuitively to be fair – as Esping-Andersen himself argues, highly decommodifying welfare systems that are only accessible by a minority offer little overall decommodification (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 49). This logic though is not applied to the case of Australia that, whilst offering high programme coverage via a means-tested system, is negatively scored (see Esping-Andersen, 1990: 54). This means that Australia's already low decommodification scores are further reduced by an arbitrary coverage rate of 50%. Evidently, it is acceptable for the extent of programme coverage to be included in an index of decommodification but its particular use as a weight is not adequately justified theoretically, empirically, or

methodologically. The unique way in which the coverage variable is treated means that the indexes perhaps reflect coverage rates rather more than decommodification levels (Fawcett and Papadopoulos, 1997).

TABLE 2 HERE PLEASE

It is not possible to explore the impact of the weighting on Esping-Andersen's original 1980 decommodification scores but the updated decommodification data (presented according to Esping-Andersen's methodology – weighted - in Table 1) from 1998/9 provides the opportunity to compare how treating the coverage variable in the same way as the other constituent variables (i.e. using the mean and standard deviation scoring method of 1, 2 or 3) alters the individual country decommodification scores, the relative relationships of the countries and the composition of the three regimes (Table 2). Table 2 shows the unweighted updated decommodification scores for each of the three constituent indexes and for the combined decommodification scores. The relative relationships of countries in Table 2 have changed slightly compared to those in Table 1 (for example, the Netherlands moves from group 2 to group 3, Sweden is no longer the highest scorer) but what is perhaps the most notable change is that in the range and scale of the scores: in the weighted data in Table 1 the range is 11.5 to 34.7 and all the countries have unique decommodification values, where as in the unweighted data in Table 2 the range is 20 to 49 and several countries share the same scores (for example, New Zealand and the UK both score 26, and the Netherlands and Sweden 46). The differences between individual countries are a lot less stark and, without using coverage as a weight, the whole decommodification index appears, at least superficially, to be a lot less sophisticated (all the scores are now whole numbers), compelling, and robust. The original use of weighting may therefore have been to improve the look and 'feel' of the data.

Miscalculations and Misclassifications

Commentators, such as Leibfried (1992) or Bonoli (1997) in the case of Italy, Castles and Mitchell (1993) in the case of the Antipodes, or Ginsburg (1992) in the case of the UK, have

remarked upon the possible misclassification of individual countries within the TWW typology. This commentary has largely drawn on external theoretical or empirical evidence to support the claims of misclassification. However, some instances of misclassification, most notably that of the UK, can be highlighted using Esping-Andersen's own decommodification data. Aside from the already touched upon issue of the UK's position directly on the cut off point between the Liberal and Conservative groupings, a miscalculation in the addition of the three constituent decommodification scores (pensions, unemployment and sickness) of two countries (Japan and the USA) resulted in the use of an erroneous mean and standard deviation and the subsequent misclassification of three borderline countries: Japan in the middle (Conservative) decommodification group; and the UK and Ireland in the (Liberal) low decommodification group.

TABLE 3 HERE PLEASE

Japan scores 10.5 in the pensions index, 5.0 in the unemployment index and 6.8 in the sickness index (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 50; and reproduced in Table 1). This amounts to an overall total decommodification score of 22.3. However, in his combined decommodification Table (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 52; and reproduced in Table 1) Esping-Andersen gives Japan a combined score of 27.1, an increase of 4.8. The opposite error is made in the case of the USA. It scores a total of 14.2, 7.0 in the pensions index, 0 in the sickness index and 7.2 in the unemployment index (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 50; and reproduced in Table 1). However, in the combined decommodification Table (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 52; and reproduced in Table 1) the presented USA score is 13.8. These calculation errors immediately impact upon the classification of Japan as a score of 22.3 places it firmly within the Liberal decommodification group, between Canada and Ireland (Table 1). However, the effects of the miscalculations are far more extensive than this, as the mean and standard deviation used by Esping-Andersen to classify all 18 countries on the basis on their combined decommodification scores is informed by the mistaken Japanese and USA scores. Table 3 compares Esping-Andersen's original combined decommodification calculation of the mean and standard deviation with the recalculations. It shows that the mean decreases from 27.2 to 26.9 and the standard deviation

increases from 7.7 to 7.8. Although the changes are only slight they do have an influence on how the countries are classified. Previously the cut off point for the Liberal regime was below 23.4 whereas with the recalculation it is below 23. This means that as mentioned Japan (22.3) falls into the Liberal regime, and both the UK (23.4) and Ireland (23.3) are reclassified out of the Liberal group and into the Conservative group. This fundamentally undermines the a priori assumptions about the composition of the three different welfare state models and casts further aspersions upon how, and indeed why, the indexes were constructed and combined in this manner.

Decommodification Revisited

These problems in methodology, calculation and classification cause considerable difficulties in presenting the updated decommodification index and comparing and contrasting it with Esping-Andersen's work.

Esping-Andersen's typology was originally published in 1990, but the labour market data upon which it was based was from 1980 (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 50). The updated data from which the new index is calculated is from 1998/9 (Bambra, in press). An initial comparison of Esping-Andersen's original data and the updated data (Table 1) provides evidence of change, both in terms of the slight decrease in average total decommodification from 27.2 in 1980 to 25.7 in 1998/9, and the change in the relative relationships and group membership of the countries: Canada's improved ranking places it in the medium group, Switzerland, France and Finland similarly move up a group to the high decommodification grouping, whereas the relative decommodification levels of the Netherlands and Denmark fall and they are in the medium group in the new index. Indeed, only Sweden maintains the same rank position (highest scorer) in each of the indexes as the rank order of all of the other countries differs.

There are however, some similarities between the indexes, most notably the sustained position of the Norway and Sweden as two of the most highly decommodifying states, Italy and Germany in the medium decommodifying group and Australia, New Zealand and the USA in the low decommodifying group. In light of the previous discussions it should also be noted

that the recalculated 1980 data (Table 3) shows slightly less change both in terms of the reduced decrease in average total decommodification (26.9 to 25.7) and the positioning of certain countries, most notably Japan in the low group and Ireland in the medium group.

Nonetheless, the overarching message from the new data is one of fragmentation, the three worlds have not remained static and there has been considerable movement in the relative relationships of the constituent countries. However, due to the manner in which the original index and, through its methodological replication, the updated index, were designed it is difficult to draw any firm empirically based conclusions about the broader meaning of the changes in decommodification and individual country scores. It is not possible, due to the way in which the majority of variable scoring is based upon the relative position of a country's value in regard to the overall mean value for a variable, to comment usefully on changes in individual country scores. For example, the raw data value of one country may have remained relatively stable overtime for a particular variable, such as replacement rates, but if the overall mean for that factor has increased their decommodification index score of 1, 2 or 3 for that variable may actually decrease or increase. A comparison of the two indexes therefore can only show differences in the relative decommodification relationships between countries rather than any change in absolute decommodification values.

Conclusion

This research note has discussed the theoretical, empirical and methodological limitations of Esping-Andersen's index and taken the opportunity presented by the updated decommodification data to explore the specific issue of weighting in each of the constituent decommodification indexes. This has suggested that the indexes may not in fact be analysing decommodification but rather programme coverage rates and this has implications for how the typology is interpreted. Furthermore, an overlooked error in Esping-Andersen's original calculations has been revealed and the resulting incorrect positioning of three countries – Japan, the UK and Ireland has been highlighted. Taken together with the other methodological criticisms already present within the welfare state modelling literature, these points have undermined the original intentions behind revisiting and updating the TWW

decommodification index. It has been shown that only the relative relationships between the countries can be examined. There is evidence, however, despite these limitations, that the relative positioning of the countries has changed quite considerably and that the TWW are no longer, at least in terms of decommodification, an empirical reality. Indeed, the methodological nuances and overt miscalculations identified in the original index raise questions about the extent to which the TWW typology ever actually existed at all. Esping-Andersen's analysis was overtly theoretically informed a priori, but the decommodification index data was presented as a taxonomy that broadly supported the theory of three different types of welfare state. This was perhaps a mistake and whilst at the theoretical level, the main tenants of the TWW decommodification model may still exist (Esping-Andersen, 1999) at the empirical level the updated data suggests that the model can no longer be supported.

Limitations

The updated decommodification index replicated Esping-Andersen's method as closely as possible but there were some inconsistencies in data availability (for more details see Bambra, 2005b). It should be noted that Esping-Andersen's TWW typology was based on more than just the decommodification indexes; stratification and the private-public mix were also considered. These aspects would also have to be recalculated before a judgement could be made on the overall empirical robustness of the TWW. The updated index is therefore not entirely comparative to the original TWW, but it is indicative.

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Table 1: Decommodification in old-age pensions, sickness benefits, and unemployment insurance, 1980 and 1998/9

Esping-Andersen decommodification index[A] 1980					Updated decommodification index[B] 1998/9				
	Pensions	Unemployment	Sickness	Combined		Pensions	Unemployment	Sickness	Combined
Australia	5.0	4.0	4.0	13.0	N. Zealand	6.5	2.5	2.5	11.5
USA	7.0	7.2	0	13.8	Australia	6.5	-	2.5	13.5*
N. Zealand	9.1	4.0	4.0	17.1	USA	7.0	7.0	0	14
Canada	7.7	8.0	6.3	22.0	UK	5.4	4.6	5.4	15.4
Ireland	6.7	8.3	8.3	23.3	Japan	4.6	7.6	-	18.3*
UK	8.5	7.2	7.7	23.4					
Italy	9.6	5.1	9.4	24.1	Ireland	9.8	6.6	5.7	22.1
Japan	10.5	5.0	6.8	27.1	Italy	10.7	6.2	10.7	27.6
France	12.0	6.3	9.2	27.5	Germany	7.6	9.2	10.9	27.7
Germany	8.5	7.9	11.3	27.7	Canada	10.5	8.1	-	27.9*
Finland	14.0	5.2	10.0	29.2	Netherlands	10.5	9.1	8.4	28
Switzerland	9.0	8.8	12.0	29.8	Denmark	9.1	9.1	10.8	29
Austria	11.9	6.7	12.5	31.1	Switzerland	9.9	-	-	29.7*
Belgium	15.0	8.6	8.8	32.4	Austria	15.1	7.1	8.9	31.1
Netherlands	10.8	11.1	10.5	32.4	France	15.3	8.5	7.7	31.5
Denmark	15.0	8.1	15.0	38.1	Belgium	14.3	10.0	7.6	31.9
Norway	14.9	9.4	14.0	38.3	Norway	13.4	10.3	10.3	34
Sweden	17.0	7.1	15.0	39.1	Finland	16.4	9.1	9.1	34.6
					Sweden	13.9	10.4	10.4	34.7
Mean	10.7	7.1	9.2	27.2	Mean	10.4	7.9	7.4	25.7
SD	3.4	1.9	4.0	7.7	SD	3.7	2.2	3.5	7.6

A Esping-Andersen, 1990: 52
B Bambra, 2005b
* Insufficient data to calculate some of the component index scores and so the combined score represents an average of available scores (for details see Bambra, in press).

Table 2: Un-weighted decommodification in old-age pensions, sickness benefits, unemployment insurance, and combined 1998/9

	Un-weighted updated data 1998/9			
	Pensions	Unemployment	Sickness	Combined
USA	10	10	0	20
N. Zealand	14	6	6	26
UK	9	8	9	26
Japan	8	10	-	27*
Australia	14	-	6	30*
Ireland	14	10	9	33
Germany	11	13	15	39
Italy	15	10	15	40
Canada	15	12	-	41*
Denmark	13	13	15	41
France	20	12	11	43
Austria	20	11	13	44
Belgium	19	14	11	44
Switzerland	15	-	-	45*
Netherlands	17	15	14	46
Sweden	18	14	14	46
Finland	21	13	13	47
Norway	19	15	15	49
Mean	15.1	11.6	11.1	38.2
SD	3.9	2.5	4.2	8.8

* Insufficient data to calculate some of the component index scores and so the combined score represents an average of available scores (for details see Bambra, 2005b).

Table 3: Combined decommodification calculations, 1980.

Combined decommodification scores (original data 1980[A])			
Esping-Andersen Calculations[A]		Actual Calculations	
Australia	13.0	Australia	13.0
USA	13.8	USA	14.2
N. Zealand	17.1	N. Zealand	17.1
Canada	22.0	Canada	22.0
Ireland	23.3	Japan	22.3
UK	23.4		
Italy	24.1	Ireland	23.3
Japan	27.1	UK	23.4
France	27.5	Italy	24.1
Germany	27.7	France	27.5
Finland	29.2	Germany	27.7
Switzerland	29.8	Finland	29.2
		Switzerland	29.8
Austria	31.1	Austria	31.1
Belgium	32.4	Belgium	32.4
Netherlands	32.4	Netherlands	32.4
Denmark	38.1	Denmark	38.1
Norway	38.3	Norway	38.3
Sweden	39.1	Sweden	39.1
Mean	27.2	Mean	26.9
SD	7.7	SD	7.8

A Esping-Andersen, 1990: 50-52